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A Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of Gendered Representations in Nepal's Grade XI Compulsory English Textbook

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Abstract

The study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) to Nepal's Grade XI Compulsory English textbook, for interrogating the construction of gender across selected readings, literary texts, and routine language-learning tasks included in the book. Using Fairclough's (1992, 1995) three-dimensional model (text, discursive practice, and social practice) and Lazar's (2005) FCDA approach to guide the analysis, the study demonstrates how the textbook both creates conditions for, and simultaneously limits, feminist meanings. The findings illustrate a strong counter-discourse telling the subject-position of rights-bearing women and girls, particularly in advocacy and civic texts, as collective agents. But feminist resonances are not evenly distributed: repetitive requests for practitioners in classrooms and aspirations professed within institutions also cultivate patriarchal common sense, including the denigration of women's housework through a moral regulation of marginalized mothers. This paradox can be better managed through a critical textbook pedagogy that rebels against the linear structure of dominant patriarchal narratives and passes as a measurable literacy skill (agency, evaluation, voice, and legitimization). The study concludes with practical pedagogical and assessment recommendations relevant to critical literacy goals.

Introduction

Textbooks are not unbiased sources of information. They are cultural and political artifacts that convey particular images of society, authorizing specific identities as natural, desirable, and authoritative (Apple, 2014). In the learning and teaching of language, it is used to suggest that it represents something more than just teaching grammar and comprehension, but also involves initiating people into ways of talking about world: who is important, who does what; who leads whom; who tries to interest themselves in others, to which could now be added (in some readings) who judges (Sunderland, 2000). These are patterned messages that function as hidden curriculum because the structuring logic of social life is inculcated through routine practices that are not easily reduced to explicitly articulated ideology (Mills, 2008).

The method the research shall use to discuss such processes, namely CDA (Fairclough, 1992), regards discourse as social practice: language not only reflects power relations but also helps produce them. Feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) extends concepts from CDA. Specifically, it seeks to understand patriarchal power by examining how gender is understood as a figure, an ideological construction, and an institution through language use (Lazar, 2005). Far from it: should the focus be on female representation (and their voices) in the media? Are women and men represented as actors versus recipients of action, as authoritative voices, or as objects under scrutiny? (Sunderland, 2000; Lazar, 2005)

When it comes to curriculum, "allowing a feminist perspective" means more than simply including stories about women. An activist analysis in this way is or should be transformative when learners can recognize how gendered

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hierarchies and processes are 'made natural', commodified, or rationalized; when they are encouraged to critique whose needs are represented by something, when they are promoted to 'imagine otherwise', meaning to imagine other ways of organizing social processes (Lazar, 2005; Luke, 1995). It also forces us to take an intersectional perspective, given that gender constructions are made side by side with class, poverty, or ethnic status, and ascriptions of social derogation or discrimination. It might be found that women are portrayed as the empowered subject in one module, yet as the stigmatized moral problem elsewhere (Crenshaw, 1991).

The productive landscape for feminist CDA is the Nepal Grade XI Compulsory English textbook, as it includes key gender-related texts and mundane pedagogic activities that are organized in particular ways in everyday classroom talk. From a statement in Malala Yousafzai's speech, "They are afraid of women" (Curriculum Development Centre [CDC], 2020, p. 5), to practice speaking questions like, "Your mother has cooked tasty food" (CDC, 2020, p. 180). The book also fosters a literary community through questions such as "Are women dominated by men in your society?" (CDC, 2020, p. 285). These comparisons point to a CDA concern that remains of primary importance: progressive discourse can coexist with unobtrusive attempts to re-normalize and re-establish gendered common sense.

Research questions

1. Representation: How are women/girls and men/boys represented as social actors across primary readings and routine tasks?
2. Discursive strategies: What linguistic strategies (agency, evaluation, modality, moral labeling) sustain or challenge patriarchal meanings?
3. Pedagogic recontextualization: How do tasks and activity designs amplify, neutralize, or domesticate feminist possibilities in the texts?

Literature Review

CDA and educational texts

By examining textual features, the distribution of texts, and the social factors shaping text production, CDA shows how discourse reproduces and transforms power (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 1993). In education, CDA has been applied to show how textbooks naturalize ideology through commonsense language, voice selections, and classroom-facing tasks that constrain interpretation (Luke, 1995; Janks, 1997). Fairclough (1992, 1995) metafunctionalizes the three-dimensional model, bringing together, in a single scheme, applications to macro-social practice (power and ideology as institutions of society), meso-pedagogic recontextualization (the way texts are taught), and micro-textual patterns (lexis and grammar).

A second contribution of an approach such as CDA to language education is methodological: it mediates literacy socioculturally and as practice, rather than as a decontextualized skill. Students do not read texts in a void and are schooled into what is valued, judged worthy or unworthy, respected, and dismissed, and often through apparently neutral linguistic practices (Luke, 1995). Consequently, the analysis of textbooks must address not only textual meanings but also what they suggest about reading as such and about what the learner is required to do with texts, including questions, tasks, and model answers (Fairclough, 1995).

Feminist CDA and patriarchal ideology

Feminist CDA examines how discourse sustains systems of patriarchal oppression and, conversely, can be used for social resistance (Lazar, 2005). Instead of taking gender as read, FCDA asks how gender is constructed discursively in context. This means the flourishing and silencing of women's speech and woman-utilizing imagery, the moralization of femininity, and the centering of men-as-norm (Mills, 2008). FCDA also highlights tensions: while institutions may embrace emancipatory messages, everyday language continues to reproduce gendered structures (Lazar, 2005).

Two conclusions derived from the FCDA are beneficial for textbook analysis. Empowerment talk, first of all, obscures power by personalizing struggle. In such stories of structural inequality and narratives in which exceptional subjects are placed (a "brave girl" or "heroic woman"), the collective regimes of subordination can go unnoticed (Lazar, 2005). Second, feminist criticism is not concerned with whether women are portrayed positively or negatively. It is also a matter of discursive devices: how and where women are located/place themselves as subjects, witnesses, victims, or carers (or moralized bodies), and whether gendered valuations seem persuasive (Mills, 2008)

Gender bias and inclusion in language textbooks

Investigations of language textbooks reveal ideologically driven tendencies, such as portrayals of women as underrepresented, stereotyped roles, and masculine- first terms and masculine forms (Porreca, 1984; Sunderland, 2000).

Even the first two alternatives remain binary and do not challenge the foundational narratives on which gendered labor, power, and morality rely (Mills, 2008). More subtly, bias may shift from frank rejection to more covert attitudes and practices; discourses of sexual respectability inform practice, while male experience assumes the form, for instance, of the unmarked term in statements about function (Sunderland, 2000).

Allowing a feminist perspective through critical literacy

The feminist perspective of English classrooms is frequently associated with topics such as women's liberation, independence, and androgyny. However, FCDA proposes that the view feminist critique as a critical literacy practice that can be misidentified, taught, practiced, and read (Luke, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2001). This requires teaching students how language operates in constructing agency and legitimacy, for example, through the passive voice, which obscures coercive agents ('are forced'), or through moralizing labels that justify stigmatization ('immoral mothers') (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1993).

In this way, the textbook may be considered data for teachers. It might have been students who annotated gendered actor roles whose point of view was made central, and asked them to rewrite examples in which agency and care were not equally distributed. This work is consistent with FCDA's praxis orientation, in which analysis aims to transform discourse rather than merely describe it (Lazar, 2005).

Methodology

Research design

This paper is a qualitative CDA study interpreted through a feminist lens. It derives from Fairclough's (1992, 1995) three-dimensional model and employs FCDA tools to analyze textbook discourse with respect to the reproduction of resistance to patriarchal ideology (Lazar, 2005). The aim is an explanatory interpretation: to show how gender meanings are produced through discourse and how they connect with broader social practices (Fairclough, 1992).

Data source and sampling

The primary data source is the Grade XI Compulsory English textbook published by the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC, 2020). Since CDA is intensive, the research employs purposive sampling of ideologically prominent and pedagogically impactful discursive sites. The focal sites for analysis are (a) advocacy/rights discourse (Malala Yousafzai), (b) civic/environmental leadership discourse (Wangari Maathai), (c) feminist literary critique and institutional dialogue (Susan Glaspell's Trifles), and, (d) poverty and moral regulation discourse (Jo Goodwin Parker's What is Poverty), and (e) routine speaking tasks that function as hidden curriculum.

Unit of analysis

The unit of analysis was the "discursive event": a bounded excerpt (sentence, short exchange, headnote, or task prompt) that does ideological work by positioning genders, assigning agency, or evaluating social actors (Fairclough, 1992). For every discursive event, the question is asked: Who is mentioned? Who acts? Who is evaluated? What assumptions are considered common sense?

Analytic procedure and coding

Analysis proceeded in three steps. Text-level features were first coded, including naming and pronouns (women, mother, wife; daughters/sons), modality (must, should, forced), agency/transitivity (who acts and who is acted upon), and evaluative labels (trifles; immoral). Second, a form of discursive practice was analysed about how headnotes and tasks position learners, as well as how habitual exercises normalise roles. Third, patterns were related to social practices, including patriarchy, the gendered division of labour, the moral regulation of women's bodies and motherhood, and the economic appropriation of women's work (Fairclough, 1992, 1995; van Dijk, 1993).

Trustworthiness and reflexivity

Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation across genres such as speech discourse, civic narrative, drama, poverty discourse, and routine tasks to reduce the risk of findings being genre-bound (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To enhance confirmability, the research anchored the claims in brief, verbatim quotations and considered multiple readings (e.g., empowerment discourse that can slide into essentialized femininity). Because CDA is interpretive, reflexivity is

required; the interpretation of 'feminist perspective' here is a lens from which to consider institutional meanings of gender rather than an index to individual intentions of writers or teachers (Fairclough, 1995; Lazar, 2005)

Findings

Counter-discourse: Women's voice and rights-bearing agency (Malala)

Gender oppression is identified in the Malala section as a political project sustained by fear of women's voice: extremists "are afraid of women' and 'the voice of women frightens them' (CDC, 2020, p. 5). The repeated recourse to "afraid" operates ideologically, exposing domination as a motivated and defensive structure rather than as the natural order.

This passage also foregrounds structural coercion: "young girls have to do domestic child labour and are forced to get married" (CDC, 2020, p. 5). The passive construction "are forced" indicates constraint but submerges the coercive agents. An educational lecture on feminist Critical Discourse Analysis might use this example as a foundation; students can identify potential social actors (family pressure, employers, community norms, state policy) and analyze how speech can make coercion seem to lack agency.

The speech advocates for the dismissal of discrimination "based on cast, creed, sect, religion, or gender" and argues that "we cannot all succeed when half of us are held back" (CDC, 2020, p. 6). Equality is shown as a shared prerequisite for societal progress, framing girls' education as a public good. The parallel pairing of "daughter and sons" normalizes girls' right to education by challenging male-centered assumptions (CDC, 2020, p. 5), a subtle gender-norming strategy identified in textbook analyses.

Women's Organization and the Political Economy of Care and Capital (Maathai)

Women are depicted as collaborative leaders in environmental initiatives in the Maathai text. A quantitative statement supports women's leadership as a widespread societal phenomenon: "over 1,500 tree nurseries, 99 percent run by women" (CDC, 2020, p. 63). The narrative presents women as learners and knowledge creators, highlighting their skill development and their designation as "foresters without a diploma" (CDC, 2020, p. 63), thereby challenging the idea that institutions must validate expertise.

Simultaneously, "women do a lot of work that needs caring" (CDC, 2020, p. 63). FCDA understands this as a tension: the expression can affirm women's experiential knowledge, but it can equally essentialise care as innately feminine rather than as socially assigned labour (Butler, 1990; Lazar, 2005). The pedagogic risk is that students hear women's leadership as "women are naturally caring" rather than "women's labour is structurally organized around care."

A particularly explicit political economy insight falls out of the claim that, "But the minute money is in, the men come in" (CDC, 2020, p. 63). This sentence encodes patriarchal appropriation: the value of women's grassroots labour is open to capture by men when this work becomes economically valuable. It provides a direct connection between textual analysis (stilted causal formula) and social practice (gendering of resource control).

A pedagogic framing with analytic feminist critiques (headnotes and questions)

So, in addition to the readings, the textbook's discursive practice sometimes explicitly invites feminist inquiry. For example, before reading Trifles, learners are asked: "Are women dominated by men in your society?" and "Are there differences between men and women in how they think, act, communicate…? (CDC, 2020, p. 285). These questions frame gender inequality as a valid topic for classroom consideration and place gender norms in social practice rather than individual temperament. In Fairclough's (1995) terms, they operate as pedagogic pre-framing: they target classroom talk at social critique and legitimize feminist reading as school discourse.

Likewise, in the Maathai unit, there are comprehension questions like "Mention the problems faced by women in Kenya" (CDC, 2020, p. 66). This can lend itself to a feminist perspective if it opens up conversations about structural constraints (resource scarcity, unpaid labour burdens, and political exclusion). However, without tasks that question why such problems exist or how they are sustained, the answer can also become domesticated, purely factual. Thus, the presence of such questions is less important than their use, demonstrating CDA's focus on recontextualisation (Fairclough, 1995).

Domestic abuse and patriarchal trivialization as institutional talk (Trifles)

In Trifles, patriarchal devaluation is not just addressed but performed through institutional male talk: a woman is "worryin' about her preserves," and the generalized statement that follows states that "women are used to worrying over trifles" (CDC, 2020, p. 289). That evaluative term "trifles" acts as ideological shorthand that delegitimizes women's domestic labour and concerns. In terms of CDA, the line carries out both evaluation (women are trivial) and naturalization (women "are used to" such a trivialization), reiterating sexism as common sense.

Most importantly, the play is a model of resistance through women's counter-reading of domestic evidence. This allows for a classroom move specific to feminist CDA: students can contrast the interpretations offered by a male and a female character in the same domestic space, which is how knowledge and authority are gendered in institutional contexts.

Moral regulation and feminization of blame (the discourse on poverty)

The poverty discourse has a condensed case of moral regulation: it refers to "the immoral mothers of illegitimate children" (CDC, 2020, p. 278). The phrase leverages moral blame ("immoral"), uses women as a target specifically ("mothers"), and summons respectability politics ("illegitimate"). The discourse of poverty, such as this, is framed in moral terms rather than in terms of structural equality, which further perpetuates punitive attitudes and the abdication of collective responsibility.

The same unit intergenerational constraint scripts: "And my daughter? At best, there is for her a life similar to mine" (CDC, 2020, p. 277). Because it links gender to class and social marginality, this line can undergird intersectional feminist analysis by dramatizing how girls inherit constraint at the conjunction of poverty and stigma.

Hidden curriculum in routine and Language That Is Inclusive but Binary

Routine practice tasks enact gender norms by redoing them over and over. Speaking practice "Your mother has cooked tasty food" (CDC, 2020, p. 180) relates a default identity of mothering to unpaid domestic labour, as long as we do not habitually identify ourselves otherwise. A reaction prompt like "My wife lost the mobile I presented on her birthday" (CDC, 2020, p. 97) assumes heterosexual marriage. It positions the wife as one who misplaces an expensive gift, which can reproduce subtle gendered evaluation. Another prompt, "A has won boys' single badminton game" (CDC, 2020, p. 98), reiterates gendered hierarchy by centering male achievement as the unmarked category of sport.

Simultaneously, the same speaking unit contains inclusive-but-binary forms such as "his/her" (CDC, 2020, p. 98; CDC, 2020, p. 180). While this indicates an institutional goal of inclusion along gender lines at the individual level, it fails to challenge the binary conceptualization. Its representation in social practice, which continues to feature in participation at home or for public benefit. Research on gender in textbooks shows that superficial inclusion can coexist with persistent stereotypes.

Discussion

The textbook's gender rule is inconsistent rather than homogeneous. Feminists' counter-discourses are most potent in prestigious genres such as advocacy speeches and civic narratives, as well as in the explicit feminist framing of literature. Simultaneously, patriarchal common sense is perpetuated by trivialization, moral regulation, and domestic role examples. This pattern aligns with FCDA arguments that institutions may incorporate visible feminism while everyday discourse patterns remain conservative.

From a CDA perspective, these contradictions are not unintentional. They indicate that curricular institutions frequently regulate social change by incorporating "safe" equality messages while maintaining the majority of everyday arrangements, such as who cooks, who leads, and who is blamed. Gender equality is celebrated as a principle in this textbook; however, routine pedagogical discourse can still depict women as moral subjects and carers. The feminist perspective should be regarded as a critical literacy practice rather than a thematic unit.

A second implication concerns recontextualization. Empowerment texts can be consumed as individual hero narratives, provided that tasks do not include structural concerns regarding institutions, accountability, and political economy. Structured cues are present in the Malala and Maathai texts, including the dread of women's voices, forced marriage, and male capture when money is present. Nevertheless, learners' interpretation of these cues as systemic critique or as generalized moral lessons is contingent upon the duties they are assigned in the classroom.

Ultimately, the analysis suggests an intersectional interpretation: the textbook stigmatizes mothers at the periphery in some contexts but empowers women as actors in others. This is significant because stigma discourse acts as a powerful tool of social control, especially for marginalized women who are often regulated by standards of acceptability. Consequently, a feminist CDA classroom can compare units to determine the extent to which womanhood is advocated or criticized, as well as the social issues that are raised in a particular portrait.

Pedagogical and Assessment Implications

The textbook does not need to be replaced to accommodate a feminist perspective. It is necessary to teach it critically by incorporating gender analysis into the curriculum. (a) Identify gendered actors, (b) Mark agency (who acts), (c) Mark evaluation (who is evaluated), (d) Interpret what is presented as common sense, and (e) Propose equitable rewrites. This is a practical classroom protocol. This protocol can be implemented in the context of extracts such as "women are used to worrying over trifles" or "immoral mothers…" (CDC,2020).

Teachers may also implement "tension tasks" that emphasize contradictions. For instance, Maathai's women-led organizing is complemented by a care discourse ("work that requires caring") that can be used to debate whether care is socially assigned labour or a naturalized femininity. Linking this to the political economy claim that the men enter "the minute money is in" (CDC, 2020, p.63) supports a gender-transformative analysis grounded in textual evidence.

To ensure that feminist critical literacy is consistent across classrooms, alignment of assessments is critical. Rubrics that recognize critical interpretation and the use of accurate evidence can be used to evaluate brief CDA paragraphs, rewrite-for-equity items, and mini- project reports. This alignment transforms the gender perspective from an optional discussion to a measurable learning outcome.

Conclusion

The feminist CDA of Nepal's Grade XI Compulsory English textbook demonstrates that the book contains robust feminist resources on women's collective leadership, girls' education as an entitlement, and women's voices as a form of political power. However, it also perpetuates patriarchal norms through routine pedagogic discourse, the trivialization of domestic labour, and the moral regulation of marginalized mothers. The most significant implication is that the feminist perspective can be applied to language competence. Students learn to analyze agency, evaluation, and legitimacy in texts and to redesign discourse to promote equity.

Limitation and future research

The study's scope is limited by its exclusive emphasis on task and textual analysis. Classroom discourse is not automatically determined by textbook discourse; teachers and students may negotiate, resist, or disregard specific meaning. Consequently, future research should integrate CDA with classroom observation, teacher interviews, and student work samples to investigate how feminist readings are assimilated. A second approach is to conduct comparative analysis across grades and subjects to determine whether feminist counter-discourses are increasing or decreasing throughout the curriculum.

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